

The silence in their voice:

Three Uncles and Khaled!

I talked with my uncle in Palestine today. We talked about our land, the food that I miss, and how the checkpoints are everywhere. My uncle, a taxi driver, said, "If you open your closet or your notebook, you will find a checkpoint." He took in a deep, heavy breath, and I didn't hear him exhale. Finally he broke through the dead air, saying, "Checkpoints are outside my window, in the rearview mirror of my car, in the mountains where the sage grows" and adding with a nervous chuckle, "The checkpoints are mixed with my grey hair."

I talked to my uncle today, a school teacher, his voice reminded me of the smell of the sage. He hasn't been working for a few months now and has three children. He told me, "For months now, it has become a tradition for Israel to close all the entry and exit points of the West Bank at midnight." This seker, as it's called in Hebrew, or full shutdown in English, can last weeks or months. In a blink of an eye, my uncle began rapidly asking questions for which I had no answers, "When they close the borders, what do you call that? Security measures? When I can't feed my children, what do you call that? Implementation of a security policy? When my children have no pencils or papers to write with, what do you call that? Terror containment?"

I talked to my uncle today. He's a welder. The first thing he did was ask about my checks? In Arabic, chubby kids are called "checks." My uncle spoke softly, like a grandmother singing the harvest song to her grandchild. I listened to his breath, and I could hear his heart trying to end the occupation! My uncle works inside Israel like many Palestinian workers. My uncle hasn't been able to work for months now.

As my uncle talked I could smell his جلاوزة / Gauloise cigarettes over the phone, he exclaimed, "You know Izz, every war ,they close us in, they shut down the borders, they close the sky". He then took a lengthy pause, and when he spoke again, he spoke so faintly, "I am tired, Izz!" and went quiet again.

Before the end of the video call, my little cousin Khaled came on to say hello. Khaled is an energetic boy who loves football. At first, I didn't recognize him. The past few months have aged him and dimmed the brilliance of his energy. Even through the phone screen, I could

see his eyes searching for his missing childhood, and the clouded skies of my childhood rushed out of my body like a scared gazelle.

I talked to my uncles and Khaled today and every call ended in the palpable, dense silence that comes when uttering a final word feels too permanent..